

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Sounding Executive ▶ 03/08/06

Bruce, the local head of IT for a worldwide organization, was giving me feedback about two managers he wanted to groom for promotion. Here's what he said about the first manager.

"She's great with her group. And she's a creative thinker. But when she reports to me she goes on forever and piles on all this irrelevant information. Sometimes I get really impatient listening to her."

Here's what he said about the other manager. "He's one of the strongest technical experts we have. But here again, I want the big picture of his projects but I get a blow-by-blow description of every test his group runs. I find myself wanting to turn some key that'll get him going at my speed."

Talking at a higher level is difficult for almost everyone, even executives. Why? Because we all know so much about what we do every day and we think those details are what makes our jobs valuable and important. On some level that's true: the details do make our jobs valuable and important. To us. But not to our bosses. One of the most frequent complaints I hear from senior people is that information isn't presented to them at a senior level: they're always having to re-interpret and re-assess what they hear and they don't like doing it.

Here's how to sound more executive.

Imagine you're coming to my house for the first time. I'm giving you directions. I tell you that at the first stoplight after the freeway is this fabulous taco stand on your right that still has the original neon sign from the 1950's and is being considered by the city council for historical status but that a land developer is trying to buy the family out and there's a petition drive in the neighborhood and . . .

You get the point, right? All that information is accurate. And it's obviously important to me. But it is completely irrelevant to you if what you need is to get to my house.

Ask yourself, with every piece of information you speak, "Why am I telling them this right now? Is this critical to their understanding? Really?"

We humans are great at justifying our behaviors. Don't justify. Be rigorous. If you have any doubt about why you're telling a detail, don't tell it.



Put simply, your boss wants bullet points. Talk in headlines. Save the details. If your boss wants background or context or explanations or reasons, she'll ask.

From years of coaching this skill I've found people edit fairly well after they've asked "Why am I telling this right now?" What's difficult is to remember to ask in the first place! It means you have to actually think before you speak. Bummer, hunh? Like any new skill, it may slow you down in the beginning. But once you learn to ratchet your thinking up to the satellite altitude, you'll be able to do it while walking to a meeting.

To sound more executive:

- ▶ Ask, "Why am I telling them this now?"
- ▶ Think at a satellite altitude.
- ▶ Speak in bullets.
- ▶ Provide details when asked but not as a default.

And most certainly, no stopping at the taco stand!

Read a related Tip: [Staying on Track](#)

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